

# Theodore P. Shonts as the Modern Junius

## Subway Head Writes Thousands of Letters to Road's Patrons and Advertises for Chances to Indite More Thousands—Some Striking Examples

By RUSSELL DYER OWEN.

WRITING letters is an amiable weakness of the public. One has only to look at the editorial pages of the newspapers to discover that people will write letters on anything, from politics to the best way to make tea. All seem to feel that if they had only the opportunity they might become modern rivals of Junius. They criticize and are sarcastic, they attempt to be humorous and generally have a lovely time.

Perhaps there is nothing else in New York that stirs people quite so keenly and deeply as the subway. Their emotions when that is mentioned rise to a height that would have supplied sufficient inspiration to carry an ancient bard through an epic. And when they are moved to write letters on the subject they become gilded.

### More Than 26,000 Letters.

This instinct has led to the collection of what is probably the greatest array of semi-public correspondence in the country. It consists of 26,000 letters and fills files that line a large room of the Interborough offices. It is one of the means Theodore P. Shonts, head of the Interborough, uses to convert his passengers to the view that he is a public spirited official doing his best, instead of an ogre battering on the flattened bodies of his victims, the latter opinion being the view which many of them take at first.

Once upon a time, so legend has it, an irate Interborough commuter enlivened his hour between his uptown home and his downtown office by huddling himself in his crowded corner seat on a Broadway express and inditing a letter full of scorn and reproach to Mr. Shonts. He told him what he thought of the subway, the people who ran it and rapacious public service officials in general.

Mr. Shonts when he got the letter meditated upon it one full hour. Then he sat himself down in the quiet of his office and reproved this irate commuter soulfully. The irate commuter, he said, should understand that running a subway train was a difficult business, that sometimes more people persisted in riding in a train than ever ought to ride in one, that they shoved and pushed and forgot that they were brought up to be ladies and gentlemen, instead of roughnecks and other things, and Mr. Shonts presented the figures to prove his contentions.

### Mr. Irate Commuter Flattered.

Mr. Irate Commuter read the figures, was flattered by having Mr. Shonts write to him and apologized for having criticized such a public spirited official.

Since then Mr. Shonts has asked people to write to him. He has even had placards put in the subway begging them to write to him. He has answered their complaints with sentences which appease and figures which overwhelm, has chided them gently for their lack of manners, and they have also liked that.

They keep on writing, and the files of letters from the subway proletariat grow and grow and comfort Mr. Shonts as he walks past them. For he has converted his correspondents, he has turned them into 26,000 mild mannered and polite persons who permit the 1,500,000 other passengers to climb up their backs and bruise their limbs and tear their clothes and who, bearing in mind their preceptor's admonitions, add to the peace and quiet of a subway rush hour by refraining from punching 26,000 opposite noses. Which is something.

### Like Mayor Gaynor's Following.

Perhaps not even the late Mayor Gaynor, noted among public letter writers, had so numerous and admiring a following as the present head of the Interborough. In Mr. Shonts's files can be found homilies on manners and morals quite impeccable in their righteousness. On reading them one gains the impression that Mr. Shonts must be a very good and upright man, who weeps and smiles over the peccadilloes of his passengers.

One imagines that he stays awake nights thinking up nice precepts for them to read on the morrow. Indeed some of the letters indicate that the readers of his placards have somewhat similar thoughts. For one indignant lady writes:

"All that is missing to complete the

foolishness of these placards is a picture of yourself with a pair of wings showing what a dear good man you are and how you love the New York public."

Did that bother Mr. Shonts, that delicately worded bit of sarcasm? No. Mr. Shonts sat down and wrote her just what a great task it is to carry her and her sisters and brothers to and from their work every day, and when it was all over she wrote back and apologized for reproving him. One wonders if Mr. Shonts would not make a good Ambassador to Berlin after the war, provided that one is sent there. He should be able to calm even the raging spirit of a Hindenburg and make him feel that being ticked by England, France and Uncle Sam was a good thing for him.

They write on the art disclosed in the placards, give wrathful and undiplomatic suggestions for them, tell him that the subway engineers don't know a thing about running their trains and offer to show the way in which it should be done. Does Mr. Shonts win them over? Judging from the replies he does.

### Almost Always Thank Him.

One gathers that never before in their lives were they so convinced of their own lack of knowledge as when they receive Mr. Shonts's replies to their missives, and in hardly an instance do they fail to thank him for letting in the light on their untutored and subway crushed minds. The placards take on a new meaning to them, they abide by his teachings and the next time a wild eyed ruffian dashes madly in at the Grand Central they lie down and let him walk on them, so he may not bruise his weary feet. Mr. Shonts bids fair to be New York's greatest educator.

Take this little dissertation upon art. A hasty man from Yonkers writes:

"I notice that you have posted in the subway cars a picture of a lady and gentleman sitting in a car, the lady with her clothes up to her knees and the gentleman with his legs crossed. I think this picture should be changed, as the other day while riding in the subway in half of the car which I could cast my eyes along there were two women sitting with their legs crossed and their feet sticking out in the aisle and not one gentleman."

### Wants Lady Dressed Properly.

"I think you should put up two pictures, and note especially that the lady should be properly dressed. I am sure that if you had put up this picture in Comstock's time you would have been locked up. This suggestion may help you."

And then Mr. Shonts demurely replies:

"I don't know whether to wink at your mistake and let you go on seeing a woman in the position described or take the artist to task for his faulty portrayal. The dark figure with white stockings and slippers is supposed to symbolize one of the early Dutch settlers, a male, not a female. If the women of New York knew you thought they had feet as large as those hung on this poor old Dutchman by the artist I'm afraid you would hear from them in no uncertain way. If all your early settlers had to carry around feet like these they must have been a weary lot."

And then this soothing comment on the observation as to women:

"Your observation has not misled you

there. Many have written me suggestions that women are more prone to this unbecoming habit of crossing legs than men. On several occasions I have been almost persuaded to this belief myself. But women have been teaching us men manners for so long that I have been a little reluctant to risk trespassing on these sacred rights of theirs by turning the tables on them, as so many have advocated, by addressing a placard to them personally on this unbecoming habit.

### Wouldn't Hurt Feelings.

"What do you think about that? Is it worth trying? We don't want to hurt their feelings if we can avoid it."

"Comstock was a splendid judge of pure art. If for no other reason the size of this poor old Dutchman's feet would not have misled him into accepting the figure as that of a woman. Of that I am sure. May he rest in peace."

Oh, Machiavellian Mr. Shonts! Come back this reply:

"Thank you for yours of the 28th ult. I hope it gave you as much pleasure to write it as it did me to receive it. Evidently I am not well qualified for an art critic."

And Mr. Shonts again wrote:

"We must all have a little fun occasionally, and I think we are the better for it. It is a good 'exhaust' and tends to take the monotony out of things."

Whereupon this letter went to repose in the files as a shining example of the fallacy of that old line, "the people be damned." Indeed, a little diplomacy goes a long way. And, speaking of diplomacy, it is evident that Mr. Shonts bears it very much in mind and knows its value to the last note. An angry man wrote this suggestion for a placard because he thought the Interborough's were too mild:

### EX PASSANT.

Why in hell don't you put your feet on the floor where they belong, you big countryman? Why don't you read the signs?

That was in the days when distressing diplomatic blunders were disturbing the world, and Mr. Shonts replied:

"I have your suggestion for the wording of a placard concerning the nuisance of passengers crossing legs. While it is fully expressive of my own feelings, in these strenuous times I fear it might be considered poor diplomacy, and I don't believe you and I want to add anything more to the burdens of misdirected diplomacy."

On patriotism he is as emphatic as on manners, and occasionally joins them both. For instance:

"I have your letter of January 30, suggesting that the placards about leg crossers be emphasized by a cartoon of Uncle Sam pointing a finger directly at each passenger as he enters the car. I don't like the idea. In the first place the figure symbolizing Uncle Sam should be used for no purpose other than those of a patriotic nature."

"In the second place, in conversation the habit of pointing one's fingers at one's listener is an indication of weakness and lack of conviction in the soundness of one's own argument or declaration. While permissible in the enthusiasm of debate or oratorical argument, its use in everyday affairs is ill mannered and repellent to people of refinement. There is a personality to advertisements, just as there is

to people—one reflects the other, and we must be careful to avoid anything in our placards which might prove offensive to those we serve."

Sometimes a letter is written to Mr. Shonts which wounds him deeply. The woman who wanted to put a pair of wings on him wrote one like that because she disliked the placards about feet.

"Such a small percentage of the people using the subway ever have a chance to sit down at all, much less to sit comfortably and cross their feet," she said. "I am a daily sufferer on your trains. Do not for one moment think that I do not appreciate the wonderful advantages the subway offers, and I have often (quite apart from Billy Sunday's reasons) thanked God for the subway, but when I see how this splendid thing is spoiled through the everlasting greed of those directly profiting by imposing on the helpless public, then my blood boils, and your nonsensical placards are the last straw."

### Sent a Grief Stricken Letter.

Mr. Shonts wrote a long, grief stricken letter to her, in which he told her she was the first one to disapprove the placards, and that he regretted very much the spirit in which her letter was written. Then he overwhelmed her with figures.

"I wonder if you know that the subway, with 136 miles of track, carries every day two and a half times as many passengers as the Pennsylvania system with 26,000 miles of track, running through thirteen States? I wonder if you realize that the present subway was designed to accommodate 400,000 passengers per day, whereas to-day it is accommodating upwards of 1,500,000 a day, nearly four times its theoretical capacity?"

"Is it any wonder that where such overcrowding obtains there is a lack of seats? Do you know a train must pass over the switch at Ninety-sixth street during the rush hour periods every twenty-six seconds?" And he concludes: "Criticism to be effective must be fair and just."

Her answer was chastened:

"I am frank to confess I had not expected an answer indicating so much personal interest in behalf of the public upon your part, which, I assure you, is most gratifying. Therefore I am now writing to you in quite a different spirit than that which dictated my first letter."

"The morning I wrote to you I had had a particularly unhappy journey in the subway, and in getting off at the station my coat had been badly torn. In that instant, with the placard 'About Feet' still in mind, I had a visual picture of you driving to your office in your private automobile."

### May Sound Socialistic.

"This may sound unduly socialistic, but it is not meant that way; but I trust it will amplify the 'blood boiling' statement to which you took exception in my other letter. I shall no longer look with such marked disapproval upon the placards which aroused my ire. Perhaps some day I may even think of a helpful suggestion to make for one of them, and will take the liberty of submitting it to you."

Mr. Shonts did not let it rest there. He wrote again:

"From what you say I think I understand thoroughly the state of mind which directed the dictation of your previous letter. When one's clothes are torn and feet tramped upon, uncomplimentary thoughts naturally take possession of one. The why and wherefore mean very little, but there is relief in telling others, who we think may possibly be to blame, what we think of them. It is keeping pent up feelings pent up which hurts."

"However, I have found it a good practice whenever I feel like writing a letter of criticism to formulate what I wish to say, then, having said it in my own mind, tear up the letter. This has saved me many painful mistakes."

There is little limit to the range of subjects touched on in this correspondence with the people who suffer. Just what the fruits of it will all be, whether Mr. Shonts will make people more patient until the present conditions, which he admits are unspeakable, are remedied, is a question, but the fact remains that in those files are letters from 26,000 persons who feel better because they have received a personal letter from the head of the transportation system they criticize.

## Leamy, Poet, Writes Under Difficulties

THOSE who happen to read the African poems of Edmund Leamy may be interested in knowing something of the origin of these verses, which tell so much of the jungle life. In their origin they are perhaps more interesting than any verse being produced at the present time.

Early in 1915 Leamy, who had been unable to do much in a literary way, went out to British East Africa as the employee of a business concern and there joined the military forces then being organized. There was soon an expedition under way against the German African regiments and Leamy saw some sharp fighting.

Along the jungle trails and on the heights Leamy saw much beauty and some humor in the African scenes between fights. When there was a chance in camp

and during night watches he would write his verses, sometimes with the snip of bullets going through the leaves overhead.

It was one thing to write them and another thing to get them out of Africa to New York, where they might have a market value. The poems were usually written legibly, in a small hand with lead pencil, on the sheets of his note book.

Sometimes the military mail was carried by native runners to the nearest railway point, which might be a good way off. Thence it was taken to the coast, probably to Mombasa, where Leamy's lead pencil scripts would wait for the very casual war time steamship which might carry them to Marseilles or Brindisi on their long journey. Various censors had to read them or were supposed to and the usual time of transportation was about four months.